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PM-VENEZUELA -URGENT- A0522 02-04 0711

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PM-VENEZUELA, 4TH LD-WRITETHRU, A0522-A0523,0868
URGENT
MILITARY UNITS ATTEMPT COUP IN VENEZUELA
EDS: COMBINES URGENT SERIES, ADDS BACKGROUND ON SERIES OF
CORRUPTION SCANDALS IN PEREZ ADMINISTRATION. PREVIOUS SERIES SHOULD
HAVE BEEN A 3RD LD. NO PICKUP.

AP PHOTO NY19

BY HAROLD OLMOS-

ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER-

CARACAS, VENEZUELA (AP) - REBEL TROOPS TRIED TO OVERTHROW
PRESIDENT CARLOS ANDRES PEREZ EARLY TODAY, ATTACKING HIS RESIDENCE
AND THE GOVERNMENT PALACE AND BLOCKING MAIN ROADS INTO THE CAPITAL.
SIX HOURS AFTER THE MIDNIGHT ATTACK WITH HEAVY MACHINE GUNS AND
MORTARS, PEREZ TOLD THE NATION FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE - PART
OF WHICH APPARENTLY FELL TO THE REBELS FOR A TIME - THAT THE COUP
ATTEMPT HAD BEEN DEFEATED.

BUT DEFENSE MINISTER FERNANDO OCHOA ACKNOWLEDGED LATER THAT THE
SITUATION WAS "STILL DIFFICULT ALL OVER THE COUNTRY," SOUTH
AMERICA'S SECOND LONGEST CONTINUING DEMOCRACY.

AT LEAST FOUR SOLDIERS WERE REPORTED KILLED.

BY 9:15 A.M. (8:15 A.M. EST), POLICE DRESSED IN FATIGUES AND
CARRYING UZI MACHINE GUNS MANNED CHECKPOINTS IN CARACAS, AND THERE
WAS NO SIGN OF REBEL TROOPS. DOWNTOWN WAS CALM, SOME BUSES WERE
RUNNING AND PEOPLE WERE MAKING THEIR WAY TO WORK. THE SITUATION IN
THE REST OF THE COUNTRY WAS LESS CLEAR.

BIG BANNER HEADLINES IN MORNING PAPERS IN THE CAPITAL SAID THE
COUP ATTEMPT HAD FAILED, BUT THERE WAS NO SENSE OF JUBILATION IN
THE STREETS.

THE GOVERNMENT THIS MORNING BANNED PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS,
BROADENED POLICE ARREST POWERS AND SUSPENDED SOME CONSTITUTIONAL
CIVIL RIGHTS GUARANTEES FOR AT LEAST 10 DAYS. THE ANNOUNCEMENT WAS
BROADCAST ON NATIONAL RADIO.

VENEZUELA HAS HAD A DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENT SINCE
1958. BUT THE OIL-RICH NATION, ONE OF LATIN AMERICA'S MOST WEALTHY,
HAS RECENTLY BEEN HIT BY VIOLENT PROTESTS ARISING FROM A GROWING
DISPARITY BETWEEN RICH AND POOR.

THE GOVERNMENT HAS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT JUST 57 PERCENT OF
VENEZUELAN ARE ABLE TO AFFORD MORE THAN ONE MEAL A DAY.

SPEAKING ON TELEVISION, PEREZ SAID MOST OF THE NATION'S
70,000-STRONG MILITARY HAD REMAINED LOYAL TO HIS DEMOCRATICALLY
ELECTED GOVERNMENT. HE SAID THE COUP ATTEMPT WAS LED BY AN ELITE
PARATROOP REGIMENT BASED IN MARACAY, 70 MILES WEST OF CARACAS. BUT
THE PUTSCH LEADER AND HIS MOTIVE WERE NOT KNOWN.

THE ARMY, LIKE MUCH OF THE COUNTRY, HAS SEEN ITS WAGES SHRINK
DRAMATICALLY BECAUSE OF INFLATION OVER THE PAST DECADE. FOR
EXAMPLE, A GENERAL NOW MAKES ONE-SEVENTH IN REAL WAGES OF WHAT HE
EARNED 10 YEARS AGO.

ELEMENTS IN THE MILITARY MAY ALSO HAVE BEEN ANGERED BY A SERIES
OF CORRUPTION SCANDALS IN PEREZ'S GOVERNMENT.

PRESIDENT BUSH TODAY CALLED THE ATTEMPTED OVERTHROW AN
"OUTRAGEOUS, ILLEGAL MILITARY COUP" AND SAID IT SHOULD BE
CONDEMNED BY ALL NATIONS. BUSH SAID IN WASHINGTON THAT HE SPOKE
WITH PEREZ BY TELEPHONE AND ASSURED HIM THE "THE UNITED STATES
SUPPORTS DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA."

PEREZ, WHO RETURNED FROM OVERSEAS TRIP MONDAY EVENING, SAID

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REBEL UNITS LED BY A PARATROOP REGIMENT HAD SOUGHT TO ASSASSINATE HIM. HE ACCUSED THE COUP LEADERS, WHOM HE DID NOT NAME, OF TRYING TO IMPOSE A "BLOODY DICTATORSHIP."

AT DAWN, ABOUT 300 REBELS WERE REPORTED STILL HOLDING OUT IN VALENCIA, 100 MILES TO THE WEST.

IN MARACAIBO, THE COUNTRY'S SECOND-LARGEST CITY AND OIL CAPITAL, THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE WAS BACK IN LOYALIST HANDS AFTER BEING SURROUNDED BY REBEL TROOPS, SAID REPORTERS IN THE CITY 350 MILES WEST OF CARACAS.

LOCAL RADIO REPORTS SAID AT LEAST 20 OFFICERS WERE ARRESTED IN MARACAY, THE BASE FOR THE REBEL PARATROOP REGIMENT.

HEAVY GUNFIRE RATTLED THE PRESIDENTIAL RESIDENCE AND PALACE WHEN THE ATTEMPT BEGAN SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT. SOLDIERS WERE SHOOTING AT PASSING VEHICLES AND PEDESTRIANS.

TELEVISION REPORTED THAT FOUR SOLDIERS WERE KILLED INSIDE THE GOVERNMENT PALACE WHEN, JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, REBEL TROOPS TRIED TO SEIZE IT. OTHER BROADCAST MEDIA SAID AT LEAST A HALF DOZEN SOLDIERS WERE WOUNDED.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, INTERMITTENT GUNFIRE WAS HEARD AROUND THE GOVERNMENT PALACE AND PRO-GOVERNMENT SOLDIERS TOLD AN ASSOCIATED PRESS REPORTER THAT REBELS HELD PART OF THE BUILDING.

LOYALIST MILITARY POLICE BLOCKED ACCESS TO THE PALACE AND LOYALIST TANKS AND ARMORED VEHICLES WERE CONVERGING ON IT. SOLDIERS SAID THEY WERE PREPARING TO RETAKE IT.

AN AP REPORTER HEARD HEAVY GUNFIRE AROUND THE PRESIDENTIAL RESIDENCE, IN THE WESTERN LA CARLOTA NEIGHBORHOOD, FOR ABOUT 1 HOURS. THEN SHOOTING WAS SPORADIC.

COUP TROOPS SEEN ON THE STREETS APPEARED TO BE WEARING ARMBANDS WITH THE COLORS OF THE VENEZUELAN FLAG.

"AFTER SO MUCH CORRUPTION AND DISHONESTY, I SAW THIS COMING," SAID DALMIRO RANGEL, A UNIVERSITY STUDENT IN CARACAS. HE CALLED IT A WARNING BELL TO "DEMOCRATIC LEADERS WHO AFTER 33 YEARS IN POWER HAVE DONE LITTLE FOR THE PEOPLE."

ONLY 10 YEARS AGO, VENEZUELAN WAS RIDING THE CREST OF HIGH OIL PRICES.

BUT THE COUNTRY OF 19.3 MILLION PEOPLE HAS SPENT THE PAST DECADE PAYING OFF A FOREIGN DEBT OF MORE THAN \$35 BILLION AND WATCHING BUYING POWER SHRINK.

AND LIFE HAS BARELY CHANGED FOR THE LOWER CLASSES. UNEMPLOYMENT IS ESTIMATED BY SOME AT ABOUT 40 PERCENT, AND THOSE WHO CAN FIND WORK EARN A MINIMUM WAGE OF ABOUT \$100 A MONTH.

TODAY'S WAS THE THIRD COUP ATTEMPT IN VENEZUELA IN 34 YEARS. THE PREVIOUS TWO WERE IN THE EARLY 1960S.

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